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**JOHANNIS LAUDS VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION ON PRIVATE LANDS USDA
Highlights 2004 Performance and Benefits of Conservation Programs**

WASHINGTON, April 4, 2005-Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns today announced major conservation achievements in 2004 resulting from USDA voluntary conservation programs for private lands in remarks to the National Association of Conservation Districts.

"Investments in conservation contribute to an increased quality of life for all Americans through cleaner air, soil and water and improved wildlife habitat," said Johanns. "Through the Bush Administration's cooperative conservation efforts, landowners are working in partnership with the government to produce tangible results, conserving natural resources for this generation, our children and our grandchildren."

USDA offers a portfolio of conservation programs that give producers the technical and financial assistance they need to develop more effective conservation plans that improve the environment and help rural communities. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) are in charge of USDA's conservation programs for private land management and environmental stewardship.

These 2004 conservation benefits and successes, along with the President's conservation budgets, support a continued cooperative conservation effort that gives farmers and ranchers the ability to become the best stewards of the land. In keeping with that vision, President Bush has proposed a strong budget for conservation efforts in fiscal year 2006, including \$3.8 billion to continue implementation of the conservation programs authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill. These funds will allow USDA, landowners and operators to build on a tremendously strong record for cooperative, voluntary conservation.

National performance highlights of key conservation programs and initiatives operated by NRCS include:

Conservation Security Program (CSP): During the first year of the program, more than \$35 million helped nearly 2,200 producers conserve and improve soil, water, air, energy, plant and animal life on nearly two million acres of tribal and private working lands. Environmental enhancement activities offered by applicants included improving wildlife habitat, air quality management and on-farm energy management.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): Nearly \$720 million helped almost 46,500 farmers and ranchers improve soil, air and water quality and related resources on private working lands. About 62 percent of EQIP funds were associated with livestock concerns. More than 8 percent of approved contracts were signed with limited resource producers and beginning farmers. Approximately 60 percent of funded practices directly impact one of the four national EQIP priorities while 40 percent reflect a primary impact on state or local priorities.

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP): \$90 million funded 550 conservation easements on nearly 115,000 acres of valuable farm and ranch land to protect it from conversion to nonagricultural uses. For every federal dollar invested through FRPP, an additional \$2.28 has been contributed by participating state and local governments, nongovernmental organizations and landowners.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP): \$56 million funded more than 1,000 private landowners protect and restore grasslands, biodiversity and wildlife habitat and reduce soil erosion while sustaining viable working ranches on 283,000 acres. An additional \$2 million was provided to help greater sage grouse conservation and recovery efforts in four western states. GRP is administered jointly by NRCS and FSA.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP): Nearly \$275 million helped more than 1,000 private landowners restore, enhance and protect wetlands to maximize wildlife habitat and wetland functions and values on close to 200,000 acres. Restoration projects were completed on nearly 150,000 acres of wetlands and associated upland areas. The first two Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) partnership projects were approved. More than \$4 million was provided for the Lower Missouri River WREP project in Nebraska that will restore and enhance a total of 18,800 acres when the project is completed. Nearly \$3 million was provided for a WREP project in Minnesota that will restore approximately 7,250 acres of environmentally sensitive wetlands throughout the state.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP): More than \$27 million funded over 3,000 private landowners create, restore and enhance wildlife habitat for upland wildlife; wetland wildlife; threatened, endangered or at-risk species and fisheries as well as other types of wildlife. Of the more than 430,000 acres enrolled in the program last year, 21,000 acres will help threatened and endangered species. During the first year of the WHIP Salmon Habitat Restoration Initiative, 47 landowners, tribes and municipalities signed contracts and agreements totaling \$3.3 million to improve nearly 900 acres of riparian habitat and to open hundreds of miles of streams for fish passage in five states.

Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA): \$10.2 million assisted 723 agricultural producers address natural resource concerns by incorporating conservation into their farming operations while managing financial risk on 105,000 acres. More than 8 percent of approved contracts were signed with women and minority producers. AMA is available in 15 states where participation in the Federal Crop Insurance Program has been historically low.

Conservation programs operated by FSA include:

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): First established in 1985, CRP protects natural resources and enhances the environment by allowing eligible farmers and ranchers to voluntarily establish long-term conservation practices on highly erodible and environmentally sensitive cropland. In fiscal year 2004, CRP paid farmers approximately \$1.8 billion in rental and cost-share payments. Trees, grass and soil on CRP land remove an estimated 17 million metric tons of carbon per year from the atmosphere through photosynthesis. Land enrolled in CRP reduces wind erosion by 212 million tons per year. The program has reduced soil erosion by more than 443 million tons per year. During 2004, 76 percent of all applicants were accepted into the program, the highest acceptance rates in the program's history. As a result, the total acreage of CRP will rise to 35.6 million acres, or 90 percent of the total 39.2 million acres authorized under the Farm Bill.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP): CREP is a federal-state partnership that targets additional resources in defined geographic areas for conservation practices such as buffers and filter strips. Three new CREP agreements were established in 2004. The Ohio River Western Pennsylvania CREP will provide 100,000 acres of cropland or marginal pastureland to be devoted to conservation practices. A New Jersey CREP will improve water quality of streams flowing into the Atlantic Ocean with 30,000 acres of cropland and marginal pastureland being planted to filter strips, riparian buffers, grass waterways and contour grass strips. A New York CREP will enhance water quality in 12 major watersheds throughout the state.

Detailed information and performance data on NRCS voluntary conservation programs at the national and state levels can be found at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs> and on FSA programs at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov>.

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